

External Review of the Halifax Regional School Board's Support of Rehtaeh Parsons

FINAL REPORT

Debra Pepler and Penny Milton
June 14, 2013

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ABOUT THE REVIEW

On April 18, 2013, we were appointed by the Government of Nova Scotia to conduct an independent review of policies and protocols of the Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB) and associated agencies, as they relate to the tragic death of Rehtaeh Parsons. The contributing issues were reported as an alleged sexual assault, the distribution of digital images of the assault, and subsequent bullying. Those issues, however, were not the subjects of this review. Rather, our task was to focus on Rehtaeh's aftercare and on what her story might reveal about the pathways and barriers to coordinated care for students needing mental health and substance abuse treatment, particularly when the justice system might be involved. In our review we were asked to do the following:

1. Determine whether policies and procedures related to bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual violence were followed.
2. Examine policies, procedures, and support mechanisms.
3. Identify issues in the school system, and between schools and the health-care and justice systems, that may have a negative impact on students and their mental health.
4. Make recommendations to promote the safety and well-being of all students.

We were asked to report to the Honourable Marilyn More, Lead Minister on the Action Team on Sexual Violence and Bullying.

Our method

We were given 10 specific questions for the review and have set out to answer these as the foundation of our report. We have used a qualitative research approach to review relevant documents and to collect facts, perceptions, innovations, and responses to answer the 10 questions. Qualitative research gathers information that is descriptive, rather than numeric. It is designed to get a deep understanding of an issue—in this case through the perceptions of Nova Scotians and through an analysis of current documents.

Document reviews

We collected and analysed formal and informal documentation that specifies policies, procedures, training, and guidelines concerning each of the questions. The following organizations assembled all relevant written documents:

- Nova Scotia Department of Education
- Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness
- Nova Scotia Department of Justice
- Halifax Regional School Board
- Cole Harbour High School
- Dartmouth High School

- Prince Andrew High School
- Citadel High School

We were guided in our analysis of these documents by our understanding of the state of the field in policies and practices relevant to this review. Although the 10 questions did not require a formal review of provincial policy or guidelines in relation to Rehtaeh Parsons, we considered these as the framework that guides regional and local policies.

Interviews

We carefully analysed each question so that we could structure conversations to gather the required information in a single session. We conducted conversations in person whenever possible, and by conference calls when necessary. As part of our review, we met with 111 people from a wide range of roles, including the following:

- superintendents and school board staff
- principals, teachers, and other school staff
- Rehtaeh Parsons' parents
- other parents and School Advisory Council chairs
- youth in and out of school
- deputy ministers and department staff
- police officials from both the RCMP and the Halifax Regional Police
- SchoolsPlus coordinators, facilitators, and outreach workers
- representatives from youth service agencies
- healthcare professionals
- external experts

To support open and frank discussions, we assured all participants of confidentiality. We asked permission to audio record the conversations and affirmed that all written and recorded conversations will be destroyed. Where we have included direct quotations in the report, we have identified them only by the individual's position. Where we have quotations that can be linked to an individual, we have received permission from the individual to use each quote.

Public input

To collect a wide range of public responses for the review process, we launched an online response form on May 21, 2013. The government issued a press release to support the launch of the online response form, which was available in both French and English. Written submissions were also requested. The responses were analysed and summarized in a report by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood (see Appendix A). We have read the report and integrated the public responses into our considerations for this review.

Our philosophy

We have been asked whether we would name names or assign blame. We have not done that. The Government of Nova Scotia established a mandate for this review to learn from the terrible tragedy of Rehtaeh Parsons' death. Many people have been affected by the circumstances surrounding it: her grieving parents; family and friends; the school staff and students; the young people alleged to have committed dreadful acts, and their families; and the decision-makers charged with helping to keep young people safe and secure. All these people are in different ways seeking answers to difficult questions. All no doubt want us to learn from this experience and to apply those lessons to make the world a safer and more secure place where young people can find comfort and support during the sometimes tumultuous journey to adulthood, which they must navigate with the added complexity of social media. We hold a compassionate stance towards all involved, while at the same time deploring abhorrent behaviour. It is our hope that our work will help Nova Scotians to continue developing safer, more secure, and caring schools for the benefit of all young people.

Understanding adolescent development

This review is primarily focused on adolescent development and how parents, schools, and communities can provide support as young people navigate the road from childhood to adulthood. There is no one pathway of development through the adolescent years. The routes that individuals take depend on their own emotional, cognitive, social, and physical development. Each adolescent's development is also greatly shaped by relationships with family, friends, and others within the school and community. Through these relationships, they figure out who they are, as well as how to be both independent and interdependent as they begin to form close mature relationships. Adolescents of today are fully immersed in the digital world, which is here to stay. Social media invade their lives all day, every day. They need adults to guide them as they work out how to live their digital lives in positive ways, rather than negative ways that hurt others, as in cyberbullying.

Brain development may be as important in adolescence as it is in early childhood. During the first five years of life, children's brains grow connections. During adolescence, the useful connections are strengthened and the unnecessary ones are weeded out to improve efficiency. A challenge is that the parts of the teenage brain that seek out excitement are easily activated during adolescence, while the parts of the brain involved in stopping and thinking before acting are still under construction. At this time, youth need caring adults to help them avoid dangerous risk-taking and to support them when anxiety, sadness, and other emotions begin to overwhelm them.

Adolescence is a vulnerable time of life during which youth need a lot of caring, non-judgmental understanding, and support. This is the time of life when lifelong mental health problems can emerge and suicide is the second leading cause of death. As they move to independence, adolescents need us to help them

We hold a compassionate stance towards all involved, while at the same time deploring abhorrent behaviour.

safely navigate their pathways and find their potential. Those who provide the help—parents, educators, and others—need an understanding of adolescent development, and may need support to help them cope when behaviours and relationships are especially stormy.

Some children are easier to raise than others, especially during adolescence. Parents often feel judged when their children experience serious difficulties. Some parenting approaches in response to those difficulties may be ineffective—either too lenient or too authoritarian. Like their children, parents of adolescents who are at risk need non-judgmental encouragement and help in skill building to get past their own feelings of anxiety, powerlessness, and despair.

REHTAEH'S STORY

Rehtaeh was a young woman of great promise whose needs were not met. The tragedy of her death and the surrounding media attention were the catalysts for this review.

In her early school years, Rehtaeh was a keen student and diligent worker, achieving excellent academic results. She was a quiet and reserved child who met expectations at school. Rehtaeh's transition from junior high to high school involved the usual team meeting between staff of the two schools, where information about her progress was discussed. Her junior high school principal said Rehtaeh was strong academically and had had a good year. At the end of Grade 9, Rehtaeh and many of her friends moved on to Cole Harbour High School. Rehtaeh's first mid-term report in high school indicated that she was meeting or exceeding expectations in three of her four subjects. Her high school principal reported that she was a good student, although she sometimes skipped classes or was too often absent from school. In many ways, Rehtaeh was a typical Grade 10 student.

Something dramatic and traumatic occurred at a party in November 2011 involving Rehtaeh. This is not the subject of our review. Instead our focus is on what followed—specifically on the help she received at school and elsewhere in response to the trauma.

On Thursday, November 17, Rehtaeh learned that a photograph taken at the party was circulating among her peers. She was distraught. The following day she reached out to her mother and her aunt for help and told them about what had happened at the party. The Mobile Crisis Unit was called on Friday, and on Saturday Rehtaeh and her mother, Leah Parsons, went to the police, where Rehtaeh gave her statement. Rehtaeh made multiple attempts to get help, which included visits to the Avalon Sexual Assault Centre. Leah Parsons has this to say about the Centre's support:

The counsellor was really good. She (Rehtaeh) went for a few sessions, but maybe she didn't really understand that it was a process and the healing takes time.

Cole Harbour High School learned of the police investigation of the events of the previous weekend through a visit by police officers on Monday, November 21. The principal was notified by the police that there had been an incident at a party on November 12; that it involved alleged sexual assault; that alcohol was in use; and that a photograph had been taken. The principal reported that the police seemed unsure about whether the photograph was being circulated among students. She was asked to watch out for any indication that this picture was circulating among students at her school. The police informed the principal that some of the boys implicated in the incident were students at Rehtaeh's school and that Rehtaeh's mother intended to transfer her daughter to Dartmouth High School. Rehtaeh's aunt assumed legal guardianship of her niece so that she could

immediately enrol her as an 'in area' resident at Dartmouth High School, which she did on November 22. Rehtaeh's school records were promptly transferred. No information about the incident or possible cyberbullying was shared with the principal at Dartmouth High School. At this point, Rehtaeh's records did not include any reference to the incidents of the party.

Rehtaeh's new vice-principal welcomed her. She wrote to Rehtaeh's new teachers that she was transferring from Cole Harbour and thanked them for welcoming Rehtaeh into their classes. But Rehtaeh rarely attended classes. She had difficulties coping with the trauma and soon returned to live with her mother. Rehtaeh's aunt formally withdrew her from Dartmouth High School on January 12, 2012, and took Rehtaeh to apply to Prince Andrew High School for an out-of-area transfer. The transfer took effect at the start of Semester 2 on February 2, 2012.

The principal of Prince Andrew High School contacted Cole Harbour High School to learn more about Rehtaeh and learned that she would need extra support. The vice-principal was told Rehtaeh had been through a traumatic event involving four boys and that she needed a fresh start. "That was enough (detail) for me," he told us. He developed a supportive and ongoing relationship with Rehtaeh, even though she was rarely able to attend classes, and he had a number of conversations with her father. Rehtaeh did not identify cyberbullying, nor did she discuss her past with him, although she made references to "the incident." The vice-principal notes how he interpreted this:

It seemed as though she wasn't ready at that time to sit down and talk about what had happened to her, her goals, or about her future. I ask myself if things could have been done differently if I'd known about the cyberbullying.

Her father recalls that Rehtaeh had a breakdown after the transfer to Prince Andrew High School and was suicidal. Her father took her to the Emergency Department of the IWK Health Centre. From the parents' perspective this was not a successful intervention. Her father reported that the programs offered did not focus on the most urgent problems of trauma and sexual assault, depression, and fear of self-harm. Instead they focused on Rehtaeh's drug use, which he believed was a form of self-medication. He felt the system was full of good people who wanted to help but that the available programs could not meet Rehtaeh's needs at a critical time.

Rehtaeh was a patient of IWK for five weeks. Her attendance record at Prince Andrew High School indicates absences through March and April 2012 due to special circumstances, and a discharge from IWK on April 20. Her parents told us that they had begged IWK to put Rehtaeh in a day treatment program because they were very concerned about the possibility of suicide. Instead, there were several exchanges between IWK and Prince Andrew, and discussions with Rehtaeh, which resulted in a carefully designed education plan for her return to school. She moved to live with her father, who told the school on June 6 that Rehtaeh was still unable to complete her school work and that she wished to move to Citadel High School for the fall semester to be closer to the IWK and the workplaces of her father and stepmother.

Rehtaeh did not meet the academic requirements to enter a program at Citadel High School but her application was accepted because of her personal needs. She registered in September 2012, but again was seldom able to attend classes. She did develop a good relationship with a guidance counsellor who introduced the idea of her going to FLECS (Flexible Learning Education Centres). Her father agreed with this plan, but instead Rehtaeh withdrew from Citadel High School on January 11, 2013, and returned to live with her mother in Dartmouth. At this time, Rehtaeh wanted to return to Cole Harbour High School where she knew people and had friends. Cole Harbour did not take her back and so she re-registered in Prince Andrew High School in February 2013. The vice-principal at Prince Andrew High School has said this about Rehtaeh's return:

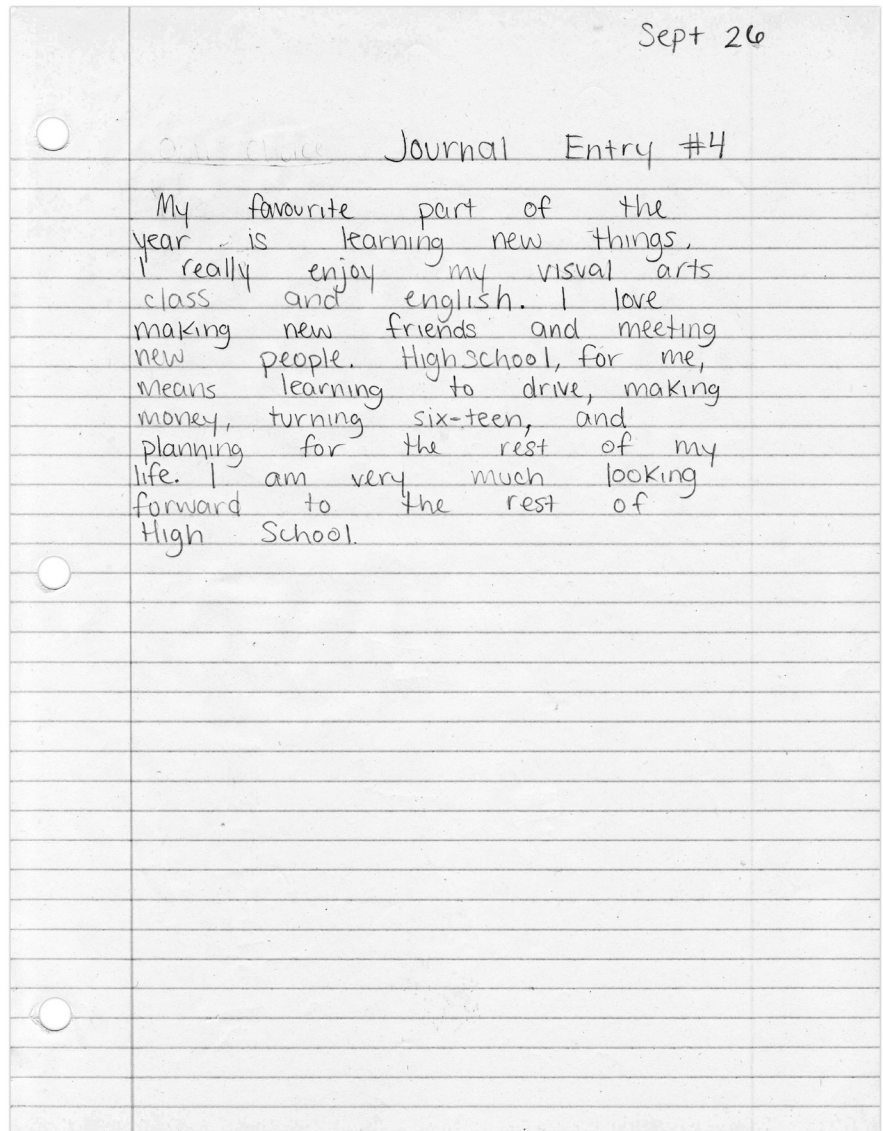
I took her in right away, without question... We saw similar trends as in the past with regards to attendance. I was able to track her down and re-focus the nature of our conversations. In collaboration with her mother, I removed her from her classes and began truly supporting her. All of a sudden we were working towards Rehtaeh's personal goals, which she now seemed comfortable enough to share with me. Her mother was on board with the new support plan. We began discussing her future plans, employment, GED programs, etc.¹ We mapped out a two-year plan which began with us working together to build a resume, practicing interview skills, and conducting job searches. I was meeting with her every second day in my office. Things seemed to be getting better. She was showing up on time for each meeting, and she had completed our agreed upon tasks. The day after it (her suicide attempt) happened, we were going to meet to practice interviews and to drop off resumes at various locations. And that was it.

The terms of our review did not include a review of the health and justice systems in this case. Therefore, we are left with many questions. We cannot know whether different interventions by educators could have set Rehtaeh on a successful path towards coping with trauma and continuing her education. We cannot know whether different interventions by health-care clinicians could have helped Rehtaeh effectively address her trauma and the potential of her self-harm. We cannot know whether different interventions by the police officers could have shut down any cyberbullying and protected Rehtaeh from its effects.

We do know that it is very difficult to stabilize and support a youth through a mental health crisis. Rehtaeh Parsons' story is one of too many in Nova Scotia and across Canada involving young people who see no way out of their problems. This is why our emphasis has to be upstream on prevention of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual assault. The problems belong to all of us. The solutions will take determined and long-term efforts on the part of governments, schools, health care, justice, community agencies, students, parents, media, and all citizens.

¹ GED refers to General Educational Development, an international high school equivalency testing program for adults.

An excerpt from Rehtaeh's notebook



AN OVERVIEW OF POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND SUPPORTS

Many of HRSB's policies, procedures, training, and guidelines could apply to Rehtaeh Parsons' case, including these:

- Regional and School Codes of Conduct
- Harassment
- Race Relations, Cross-cultural Understanding, and Human Rights (RCH)
- High School Attendance
- Safe, Secure and Healthy Schools
- Information Sharing Under Youth Criminal Justice Act
- Creating School Populations
- Acceptable Use of Computers and Internet/Intranet Technology
- Tragic Event Protocol
- School-Police Protocol
- Safe schools and Anti-bullying resources

Policies are accompanied by written procedures or protocols that set out roles, responsibilities, reporting requirements, and training opportunities or intentions.

Specific professional development programs, information, and working sessions are periodically offered to help school staff understand what bullying is and isn't, and to develop strategies and actions that nurture respect among students and between students and adults.

In every school there are staff members who are equipped to interpret the policies and handle incidents. They include:

- the Voluntary School Liaison for Race Relations, Cross-cultural Understanding, and Human Rights (RCH)
- the Voluntary Liaison for Sexual Harassment
- Go-To Educators (described in Question 3 on page 13)
- guidance counsellors
- school administrators, including the principal and vice-principals

These people help other staff members to apply the policies and to respond when incidents occur.

Students are informed of the School Code of Conduct, which is included in each school's handbook. Some schools are adopting restorative practices to help students gain a deeper understanding of the harm certain behaviours can cause. Some participants in our meetings expressed concern that 'progressive discipline consequences,' such as detentions in or out of school, do not lead the disciplined

students to reflect critically on the consequences of their actions, especially if the home condones behaviour that is not allowed at school.

The educators we consulted generally agree that the policies are most useful when they are well understood and their application in particular circumstances has become second nature. Some participants noted that a policy as written does not always meet the test of being “in the best interests of students.” Calculated risks are sometimes taken in making exceptions to the rules for the benefit of a student.

We learned that all the policies and procedures can be in place, but in the end, for students, it is relationships that matter above all else.

It’s nice to know what those underpinnings (of policies) are so that you know how to proceed. Having a strong understanding means I just know what to do.

– *A teacher*

What if an incident happens away from school?

Policies and procedures that deal with expected student behaviours, and processes to deal with harassment—including bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual assault—assume or specifically refer to activities that occur in school, on school property, or at school events held off school properties. In order to respond to an incident, the principal (or other responsible adult) must know about it and be able to investigate.

Recent legislation (Cyber Safety Act: Bill 61, Section 122a) provides that the principal may apply the school code of conduct for incidents that take place beyond school premises or school activities if the behaviour seriously disrupts the learning climate of the school. This means, for example, that a principal could suspend a student for an incident that happened outside of school. As yet, it is unclear how principals may investigate off-school activities; whether the principal should investigate allegations that are under police investigation; and how to deal with situations in which the school has no direct knowledge.

TEN QUESTIONS FOR THIS REVIEW

1. Were all HRSB policies, procedures, training, and guidelines respecting bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual violence followed in the Parsons case?

In the Parsons case, Rehtaeh's school heard about the allegations of sexual assault and the existence of a related photograph from the investigating police officers. The school took no further action because Rehtaeh immediately transferred to another school and a police investigation was underway. The school was unsure whether it should take further action because of the criminal investigation. The school to which Rehtaeh transferred received no information about these events and did not get to know Rehtaeh well, since she was registered for a very short period of time and did not regularly attend.

The application of the Creating School Populations policy and its Out-of-Area Request Form are in conflict in this case. Rehtaeh sought to return to Cole Harbour High School in 2012 as she was living with her mother in the Cole Harbour area and thought she would do better in a school where she knew people and had friends. She was denied this transfer. Her mother reported that she was told that a student who transferred out of the area could not transfer back to the original school. The policy requires schools to accommodate, wherever possible, students who live in the school's neighbourhood. But the application form to transfer to an out-of-area school requires a parent to sign the statement, "I/we understand that the transfer is permanent". Although re-entry to the school where the alleged perpetrators of the sexual assault were present may not have been in Rehtaeh's best interests, there appears to have been no discussion with Rehtaeh or her parents about the wisdom of returning to Cole Harbour. The Creating School Populations policy needs to be revised to accommodate families that share parenting responsibilities and whose children may, therefore, have a number of different addresses.

The application of a number of other HRSB policies to the Parsons case is limited by Rehtaeh's sparse attendance at school due to the trauma following the incidents of November 2011. Schools are best equipped to support students through learning in class and through relationships with school administrators, guidance counsellors, teachers, and services in school, and by referral to other agencies. Therefore, attendance is critical and absences may be a first indicator of the need for interventions.

I don't think that a policy is going to change anything in a school. It's about why do kids come to a school, why do they enjoy it, how can we create a community, how can we include people? If they're not included and involved, they fall through the cracks. We need to include people.

– A student council leader

2. Are the existing HRSB policies, procedures, training, and guidelines respecting bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual violence adequate?

Adequacy of policies, procedures, training, and guidelines is difficult to assess. The policies we have reviewed are certainly sufficient to guide any school that seriously intends to create a safe, caring, and inclusive setting for student learning. The Harassment Policy expressly deals with sexual violence, including cases where a criminal act may have taken place.

There may be value in revising existing policies and procedures to explicitly include bullying as a form of harassment. Alternatively, it may be appropriate to create an overarching policy on bullying and cyberbullying, stating that such behaviour will never be tolerated among students, by adults towards students, or by supervisors toward subordinates.

But laws, policies, and procedures can only do so much. They do not guarantee good relationships.

3. What support services are in place for students who self-identify or are reported to be facing issues of bullying, cyberbullying, and/or sexual violence from or within: (a) the Halifax Regional School Board; (b) the IWK Health Centre; (c) the Capital District Health Authority; and (d) the police?

The challenge posed by this question is that students seldom disclose that they are being victimized by bullying, cyberbullying, or sexual violence. There is shame in admitting to being victimized, and students may be concerned that adults will not respond effectively. Students need a culture that encourages them to identify trusted adults and to report their own or others' bullying and sexual violence problems to adults. They also need a school culture that expects school staff to notice students at risk—including those who bully and those who are bullied—and to act on their concerns in constructive and educational ways.

When a student has been victimized, a wide range of services is available through the following organizations.

(a) Halifax Regional School Board

School planning team: This team consists of the principal and/or vice-principals, guidance counsellors, and teachers, and may also include other professionals within the school. Teachers identify students who need support. The team identifies services within the school or outside the school. Care might include individual support from the principal, vice-principal, or guidance counsellor. (For more on the school planning team, see the responses to Questions 9 and 10.)

SchoolsPlus: SchoolsPlus is part of Nova Scotia's child and youth strategy. It uses the school as a central point for coordinating the services that students and their families need. There are 12 SchoolsPlus hub sites serving 98 schools across the province (see schoolsplus.ednet.ns.ca).

Go-To Educators: This is a program to identify and train a minimum of two staff members (e.g., teachers, guidance counsellors, social worker) within each HRSB high school, and one staff member in smaller schools, to respond to mental health issues. They will be prepared to identify students with a high likelihood of having a mental health issue; link the student to appropriate supports; and provide ongoing help for students and their parents. The training was developed and launched by youth mental health experts at the IWK Health Centre and Dalhousie University.

Guidance counselling: Guidance counsellors are often the first people to support students in situations involving bullying or cyberbullying. We heard from students, parents, teachers and school board staff that there are not enough guidance counsellors to meet the need for personal counselling. Some guidance counsellors expressed concern that guidance counsellors qualified to provide academic counselling may not be skilled in personal counselling. This situation merits further review.

(b) IWK Health Centre

IWK Mental Health and Addictions: This includes the following: Youth Forensic Services; intensive community-based and in-patient treatment; Shared Care; and Women's Reproductive Mental Health. By partnering with community agencies, the IWK meets the needs of other populations, such as immigrant youth, homeless youth, and youth with addictions.

Mental Health Advocate: The mental health advocate helps youth and their families with advocacy, rights, and navigation through the IWK health system and other systems.

(c) Capital District Health Authority

Youth Health Centres: These are located in schools to provide a place for youth to get help, including referral to health services and supports.

(d) Police

School liaison officers: For each school, the Halifax Regional Police or RCMP identifies an officer who provides guidance and direction to students, parents, and teachers. HRSB has a School-Police Protocol to support communication and cooperation between schools and police.

(e) Other critical services

Avalon Sexual Assault Centre: Avalon is an independent not-for-profit organization that provides services for women 16 years and older who have been affected by sexual violence, and sometimes for younger clients. It offers community and school-based education programs throughout the Halifax Regional Municipality, and beyond the region on request.

4. To what extent are the support services identified in response to Question 3 coordinated, and when are they best serving students as independent and/or integrated care providers?

Youth and their families often need help in navigating support systems and the spaces between systems. When a child has been victimized or has mental health problems, it can be extremely hard to find the right supports. Within schools, referrals and coordination of services are often handled by school administrators or guidance counsellors. However, the success of this coordination depends on the relationships that the administrator or counsellor has with community services.

A need was identified by the Nunn Commission² for a coordinating and advocacy system to ensure that students do not fall through the cracks when they are experiencing problems. This coordinating and advocacy system is needed when a student stays within a single school, but even more so when a student moves from one school to another. In response to recommendations from the Nunn Commission, Nova Scotia established SchoolsPlus, a program that can fulfill this coordination and advocacy role. Through SchoolsPlus, school-based facilitators and community outreach workers connect students and their families to a range of services.

Another coordinating service is the Halifax Youth Attendance Centre (HYAC). The Department of Justice operates this centre in collaboration with three other government departments: Education, Community Services, and Health. The centre addresses the needs of moderate-high-risk youth under court-ordered community supervision by providing access to a number of services, including forensic youth mental health, education, employment support, and addictions intervention (see novascotia.ca/just/Corrections/HYAC.asp).

To coordinate their services, government departments and community organizations need responsible ways to share information. This can be a significant challenge when many departments and services are involved, including Education, Community Services, Justice, Mental Health, Addiction Services, Health and Wellness, and other community organizations. SchoolsPlus has developed a common consent form for participation in SchoolsPlus for the collection, use, and disclosure of personal information. Although it is too early to judge its success, this common consent form may make it much easier to coordinate services to best serve students and their families.

Collaboration works when there's action. There was an example where we worked with police and the church and it worked because there was action. Collaboration for action, not just for a common understanding.

– A youth worker

² The Nunn Commission of Inquiry was established in 2005 following the death of Theresa McEvoy, who was hit by a young person driving a stolen car during a police chase. The young person, who had a long criminal history, had been released from custody just two days before the fatal accident. The goal of the commission was to analyse the facts leading to the accident and to recommend ways to strengthen the youth justice system.

The Follow-Up Next Day Services (FUNDS) Initiative was created as a collaboration involving Capital District Health Authority, IWK Health Centre, Halifax Regional Police, and the RCMP. This program serves families experiencing severe parent-child conflict, and coordinates crisis stabilization.

5. What is the level of understanding of staff within the HRSB about the support services identified in response to Question 3?

In our consultations, we found that board personnel, school administrators, guidance counsellors, and teachers have a fair degree of knowledge about the services available.

School staff who have questions about available services for individual students and their families usually know they can consult with the following colleagues in their school:

- Go-To Educators
- SchoolsPlus social workers
- nurses in the Youth Health Centres
- the Voluntary School Liaison for Race Relations, Cross-cultural Understanding, and Human Rights (RCH)
- the Voluntary Liaison for Sexual Harassment

In some schools, the Youth Health Centre provides outstanding support because the staff have strong helping skills and in-depth knowledge of the services within their communities. Social workers are also appreciated for their abilities to connect families, schools, and community services. However, people commented that there are few social workers within the system and many students to serve.

6. What are the required reporting procedures within the HRSB related to bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual violence? This includes HRSB and school procedures for investigating both formal complaints and informally-raised concerns related to student well-being, as well as internal communication protocols related to sharing information about students who may be experiencing problems related to mental health and/or substance abuse issues.

Specific reporting requirements under the Harassment Policy are set out with prescribed forms for reporting on the investigations and resolution of formal and informal complaints. Where students are both complainants and respondents, reports about harassment are kept in separate confidential files according to the provincial School Records Policy.

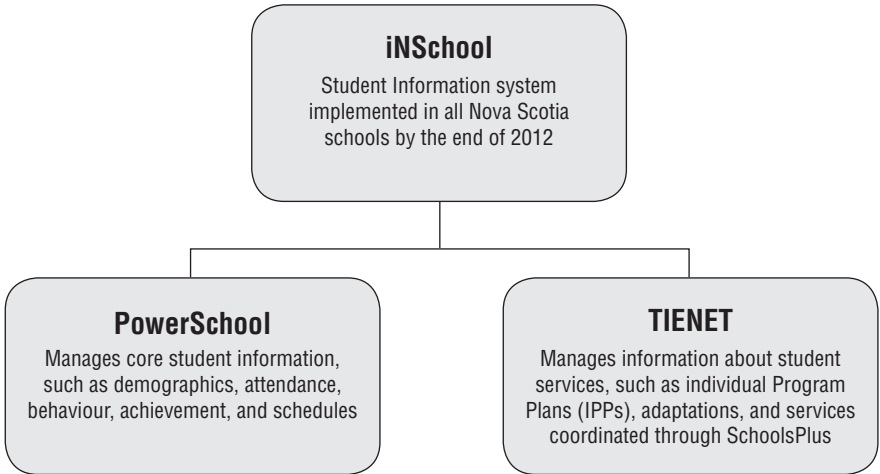
Incidents of bullying, cyberbullying, and other disruptive behaviours are now reported in the provincially and regionally supported iNSchool, the Nova Scotia student information system (see Figure 1). This new student information system

includes PowerSchool, a system that manages core student information, such as demographics, attendance, behaviour, achievement, and schedules. It also includes TIENET (Technology for Improving Education Network), a system that better enables educators to manage extended services, such as documented adaptations, individual program plans (IPPs), and services coordinated through SchoolsPlus. (SchoolsPlus is discussed in Question 3 on page 12.)

The reporting features in PowerSchool include definitions and statements of behaviours to help staff accurately report incidents. These will enable schools and the school board to better understand the scope of the problem and the effectiveness of initiatives to prevent bullying or to intervene when bullying occurs. The four different high schools where Rehtaeh was registered implemented PowerSchool in the 2010–11 school year.

For observations about the sharing of sensitive student information, see Question 7 on page 17.

Figure 1. Information management systems in Nova Scotia schools



7. Are policies and procedures in place to track and continue to provide support to students who transfer between schools, or families of schools, both within HRSB and within the province? If so, what changes should be made to increase their effectiveness and staff's awareness of their existence?

When students transfer between schools in the province, their cumulative and confidential school records are transferred to the new school under conditions set out in the provincial Student Record Policy (2006). The exchange of the cumulative records has been made easier within Nova Scotia through the implementation of iNSchool. As described above, this is a web-based program to track students' progress and incidents. PowerSchool is a program within the iNSchool system that manages core student information, such as demographics, attendance, behaviour, achievement, and schedules. PowerSchool has an incident tracking form, which principals are required to complete for students' severely disruptive behaviour. Bullying, cyberbullying, sexual harassment, and sexual assault are all examples of severely disruptive behaviours that are to be reported through PowerSchool. PowerSchool is also used to communicate about students' progress. School administrators, teachers, parents, and students all have access to PowerSchool. It facilitates communication among teachers, parents, and students, and enables parents to be more engaged in their children's education. This tracking program provides data for accountability and is also important for the early identification of students who are at risk for mental health and social problems.

The confidential records contain information such as assessments, case conferences, individual program planning, and services from an outside agency or professional. It is only in the confidential record where a student's experiences of being victimized are likely to be recorded—and only when the school knows about the victimization. Some students who have been victimized choose to change schools for a fresh start. As a result of the victimization, they may be especially vulnerable to mental health problems. At this point, there is no sure way of knowing, recording, and exchanging information about victimization.

In the sharing of information, school administrators must follow the provincial and board policies regarding confidentiality. Some principals raised a concern about sharing information when there is a police investigation. In discussions with us, school administrators recognized the fine balance between respecting privacy and sharing information to facilitate support within the receiving school. School administrators explained that with the new iNSchool system, the school records can be transferred to the receiving school very quickly. With this system, an icon identifies a student who may have additional needs or supports, or who just may have a note on their program that a teacher or administrator might need to know about. Informal sharing of information that could affect a student's well-being may depend on the receiving principal's efforts to contact the prior school to get a fuller picture of the needs of a new student. Principals who accept a student in an out-of-area transfer generally contact former schools for any relevant additional information.

Attendance is merely a symptom of the disconnection our students are feeling with their schooling.

– A school administrator

8. What interaction exists between staff within Health Authorities and/or the IWK Health Centre, and school boards where a student receives care or undergoes a hospitalization to ensure appropriate supports are in place when the student transitions back to or re-enters the class or school system?

District Health Authorities are primarily connected to schools through the Youth Health Centres based in schools.³ Outside the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), the District Health Authorities are responsible for linking with schools for adolescents' mental health and addictions. Within the HRM, the IWK is responsible for linking with schools for adolescents' mental health and addictions. The IWK is also connected to schools through a variety of outreach strategies.

When students are hospitalized at the IWK, they are expected to participate in the therapeutic classroom at the IWK, which links to their community school. The teacher at the IWK obtains curriculum information from the students' school so that students can continue working on their courses while they are at the IWK. The IWK teacher also works closely with schools when students are moving back into their community schools. In Rehtaeh's case, there was extensive and constructive communication between the IWK teacher and a school administrator at the receiving school for an education plan when Rehtaeh moved back into the community high school. In turn, the school administrator was able to ask Rehtaeh's teachers to support her and keep the administration informed if she appeared to be struggling.

Additional connections between the IWK and schools are supported through the SchoolsPlus program. The IWK currently has two counsellors hired specifically to work with SchoolsPlus. According to their strategic plan, the IWK is planning a demonstration project, in collaboration with Capital District Health Authority, for delivery of mental health and addictions services through school-based Youth Health Centres. This innovation would build stronger links with the schools and provide more immediate and local services to youth in need and their families.

In our interviews, we learned that the exchange of information between the schools and the IWK is generally strong, with close ties between the IWK and school administrators, guidance counsellors, and/or social workers. The challenges appear to occur in initiating and maintaining communications with families, and in determining the nature of the information that can be shared. To facilitate communications with families, a suggestion was made by a school administrator to have social workers support the links among schools, parents, and the medical profession. The need was identified for someone who can help the family get organized and link with both the school and health-care professionals.

³ For more on Nova Scotia's District Health Authorities and the IWK, see novascotia.ca/dhw/about/DHA.asp.

These connections are important because parents often need support to understand the value of sharing sensitive information, what information will and will not be shared, and how confidentiality will be protected for their child. In terms of the nature of information shared, it seems as if both the schools and the IWK are comfortable sharing information about how to support the student at the school. Less information is shared about the student's diagnosis and treatment, which is held as confidential information within the health system.

9. What methods are in place to provide student-specific information and updates to primary teaching and support staff, while respecting individual privacy concerns and privacy laws?

School planning teams review the cases of students who are struggling. The struggling students are referred by their teachers to the school planning team and they collectively try to work toward a solution that will best support the student. Vice-principals and guidance counsellors are first to intervene when an individual student is struggling with attendance, behaviour, or academic problems. They regularly communicate with the teachers of the specific students for whom there is concern. They do that with a view of helping teachers understand what is going on for a particular student and helping to plan a suitable response for the student. For a student who is struggling and requires more support, particularly the support of stronger parent-school links, the SchoolsPlus team, where it exists, plays a vital role in building bridges to community resources. Those sharing information within the school are sensitive to privacy concerns expressed by students, and share information on a need-to-know basis.

10. What is the expected level of knowledge on the part of school staff of indicators of crisis used to help identify students who may be experiencing issues related to severely disruptive behaviour, particularly in cases where it is affecting the students' well-being and/or mental health.

What school staff need to know about indicators of crisis is not included in pre-service education. It is learned through day-to-day practice and from colleagues, experts, and training programs. The training programs often use a train-the-trainer approach that equips a small number of educators in each school to understand specific student behaviours and appropriate responses to individual students. Examples include the Voluntary Race Relations, Cross-cultural Understanding and Human Rights (RCH) Liaison, and the Voluntary Sexual Harassment Liaison. The recently implemented Go-To training (for at least one teacher in each elementary school and two teachers in each high school) specifically trains teachers to better understand signs of mental health issues with students. A school planning team in each school provides an avenue for the referral of a student whose teachers have observed changes in attendance, behaviour, or marks. The team meetings provide a valuable forum for discussing potential problems and developing strategies to help students who are struggling.

We note that the term *severely disruptive behaviour* does not apply to students who internalize issues rather than acting them out. Victimization through bullying, cyberbullying, or sexual assault may be missed because it remains hidden from adults by youth who fear further reprisals or are experiencing shame.

Although it is reasonable that Nova Scotians continue to raise their expectations that schools will support the healthy development of children and youth, it is not realistic to expect teachers to have the specialized knowledge of social workers, nurses, mental health workers, or clinicians.

ISSUES ARISING FROM THE REVIEW

Our review has been shaped by rich conversations with more than 100 thoughtful people and over 150 public submissions that arise from the 10 questions of our mandate. Their observations, concerns, and ideas make a valuable contribution to the ongoing dialogue about raising and educating children today. The issues are relevant to everyone, and everyone has a role in solving them. Complex problems that affect the mental health and well-being of our youth will not be solved by short-term, quick-fix actions.

This section sets out five themes that emerged in our review:

- Emphasize prevention
- Involve youth in decisions
- Build strong relationships
- Expand SchoolsPlus
- Focus on mental health

We have included some provocative questions that may promote conversations at home, in classes, school staff rooms, health care facilities, and police offices, around government working tables, and in the local and virtual communities where children and youth grow up.

Why do win-lose arguments drive these debates when the long-term solutions belong to all of us?

Emphasize prevention

At their core, bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual assault are issues of disrespect and power in relationships between perpetrators and victims. Preventing these harmful behaviours requires that people learn to respect each other. Children and youth learn respect through the consistent modeling of adults and peers; through clear expectations for behavior; and through programs that build social-emotional competence. When young people make mistakes, restorative practices help them to accept that the behavior is wrong; to acknowledge the harm caused; and to take responsibility for their actions. Both parties are able to resolve their issue.

The student who has bullied and the student who was bullied are able to move on.

Incidents of bullying, cyberbullying and sexual assault require timely investigation, consequences for actions, and support for the victimized student. Disciplinary action alone is unlikely to deter future bullying.

What do students learn from suspensions or other exclusions?

Actions are urgently needed!

Of 29 rich countries, here's how Canada ranked in a recent UNICEF study of child well-being:

- 2nd in educational achievement

BUT

- 26th on the quality of relationships with parents and friends
- 24th on life satisfaction
- 21st in feeling safe from bullying at school

UNICEF Office of Research (2013). 'Child Well-being in Rich Countries: A comparative overview,' Innocenti Report Card 11, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence.

Students who internalize their pain are more difficult to detect, although the student may be equally in need of specific supports. This is especially true in cases where a student is being bullied or has suffered sexual violence. Often friends know about a friend in trouble. They will want to help by reporting their concerns to a trusted adult. After they have done so, they need to hear that their concern has been followed up. This is essential to their continuing confidence that adults can be trusted.

Are we attuned to the lives of children and youth today? Do we see and hear their difficulties?

- I am being bullied by other students at school
- I am being bullied by a teacher
- I bullied because...
- I use illegal substances because my friends do
- I have broken up with my boy/girlfriend
- I feel too much pressure at school
- I am so bored at school
- I skip school because it's not safe for me
- I cannot be myself in school
- I feel criticized and not understood
- No one cares about me
- My home life is a mess

Schools already carry a heavy load. They cannot directly teach all things that students need to learn. Students learn best when they are deeply interested in the work they are asked to do and when they understand its relevance to their lives. We do not advocate making the current curriculum bigger—there are already more expected outcomes than can reasonably be accomplished; nor do we call for a retreat from the agenda of improving academic achievement. Instead, a key aim of future curriculum reviews should be to create a balance of learning expectations among intellectual, ethical, social-emotional, and physical development for all students.

Involve youth in decisions

Youth are experts in their own lives and so must be directly involved in decisions that affect them. During our review we met with young people taking leadership in school and leadership outside of school. Many of them were students who have been pushed to the margins of their school community. Others had already left because they couldn't find their place in school.

When given the chance to talk about their needs, young people are remarkably consistent in their messages to people in authority. These are some of the messages we heard:

- View us through our strengths, not our weaknesses.
- Make the work we are asked to do relevant and meaningful to us.
- Don't judge us. Understand our efforts to adapt in challenging times.
- Don't be angry with us when you haven't taught us how to do something.
- Know us as individuals.
- Give us guidance, but don't tell us what to do.
- Learn from us about setting community standards, creating safe spaces, and including everyone.

Why are we so often surprised at the energy and eagerness of young people to make the world better?

Young people told us what safe places are like. A safe school is inclusive, values diversity (including gender and sexual differences), respects youth, seeks out their views, acts on their concerns, and provides supports. In a safe school, students are familiar with the full range of services available through Guidance and the Youth Health Centres. They know what to expect when they go for help. Stigma is reduced in schools that model respect, helpfulness, and concern for others, and where responses to their concerns are rapid and non-judgmental.

We learned that young people develop shared accountability for creating and maintaining respectful climates, using processes that identify non-negotiable standards of behavior and clear guides for working together. Youth uphold standards that they create and they monitor the behaviour of each other. They told us that these processes are not usually used in schools but are always used in conferences of the Nova Scotia Secondary Schools Association (www.nsssa.ca) and in youth organizations such as Leave Out Violence (leaveoutviolence.org/novascotia) and HeartWood (www.heartwood.ns.ca).

Build strong relationships

Strong relationships are the foundation for seeking help, having courageous conversations, and engaging others in partnerships that benefit young people. Students needing help for personal, social, and/or mental health issues are unlikely to seek it at home or at school unless they trust that the adult will respond without judgment. Some young people may not have the courage required to seek help because of embarrassment, trauma, or the stigma sometimes associated with going to Guidance or Youth Health Centres.

Our public health nurse, she's interested, she cares, she listens to everyone, so once you establish that friendship when she tells you it's a safe space, you believe her.

– *A young leader*

Young people seem to be especially attuned to authenticity in their exchanges with adults. Their trust has to be earned by adults. It is not granted simply because the adult occupies a position of authority. School climates are the sum of all relationships within the school.

Schools need strong relationships with parents, as well. Parents want the best for their children. Successfully raising children has never been simple. Finger pointing ("It's the parents' fault!" "No, it's the schools' fault!") keeps us stuck. We need to build parent-school relationships that reflect the equally important but different roles that parents and educators play in raising children today. This relationship comes easily to many parents: they know how to advocate for their child, what information from school is important, how to be taken seriously, and how to navigate systems. For others who may have more limited personal resources or prior unhappy experiences of school, relationships with the school may be minimal. Those parents need courage and support to bridge the chasm.

Strong relationships are essential among people who provide different services to youth and their families in education, health, social services, justice, and other systems. Mechanisms to improve collaboration have been established at provincial, regional, and local levels; but joint action is not always treated as a priority.

Expand SchoolsPlus

SchoolsPlus was discussed as possibly the most effective model to do the following:

- Engage reluctant parents in plans for their children in school and community services.
- Help families navigate complex systems.
- Coordinate service plans for families.
- Tackle the gaps in services that are provided separately by District Health Authorities, Youth Health Centres, Community Services, and not-for-profit organizations serving youth.
- Share information appropriately, using the combined consent form and its guidelines.

Youth and their families may need coordinated supports across different services and geographical regions, with an underlying conviction that "all youth are our youth." We believe that strategies to extend SchoolsPlus across the province will yield positive and cost-effective results. Some participants in our review are concerned about the sustainability of the current SchoolsPlus model.

Others believe that eliminating current inefficiencies, phasing out programs known to have limited or no measureable benefit, and rethinking some priorities will free up sufficient resources. For example, the Levin Report, submitted to the Department of Education in 2011, makes a number of recommendations to increase productivity and release resources from practices that may be valued but

do not add value.⁴ Most likely, similar opportunities can be identified in all human service areas.

Focus on mental health

The mental health of children and youth is a growing concern. Many young people report significant symptoms of depression and anxiety, and suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers. Mental health and related problems include eating disorders, self-harm, bullying, aggression, victimization, substance use, and risky sexual behavior. Some mental health problems arise from stressors such as sexual harassment, homophobic bullying, and racial bullying, and from isolation in the peer group at a time of life when friends are so important.

Prevention, early identification, and intervention for mental health problems are important in the adolescent years because most adult mental health problems begin during adolescence. Prevention involves building mental health literacy. A good example is the Healthy Living module recently introduced into the Grade 9 curriculum. Better understanding of mental health issues reduces the stigma for those who may be suffering and increases the likelihood that young people will seek help when they are struggling and will support their friends who are struggling. Go-To Educator training helps school staff to recognize when students may be experiencing mental health problems and to be more effective in guiding students to professional help.

We were presented with a number of ideas for improving services in mental health that are beyond the scope of our review. For example:

- Better information technologies are needed for tracking the outcomes of mental health interventions, Youth Health Centres, and SchoolsPlus in order to support evidence-based decision-making.
- It might be useful to revise the mandates of Youth Health Centres to include access to primary care for mental health issues related to bullying behaviours, victimization from bullying, gender identity, and sexual aggression or violence.

Also beyond the scope of our review, we heard the concerns of Rehtaeh's parents and questions from some physicians, some educators, and some members of the public about the care that Rehtaeh received in the health-care sector. We too have questions about whether current medical and counselling services for victims of sexual assault are designed to meet the needs of girls. A review of health and counselling services related to this case is necessary to understand what needs to change in order to more effectively help young people with mental health issues and, in particular, to help those who have been victimized by bullying, cyberbullying, or sexual assault.

We have a lot of rules at my school. I don't know them. The rules I know are the ones that I get positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement for. You don't think about the rubric, you think about what you do and how you are treated after you acted.

– A student council leader

⁴ For the full report, see www.ednet.ns.ca/stay_informed/levin_report.shtml.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nova Scotia has made meaningful progress in addressing bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual aggression. New legislation, new policies, and new strategies to stop these behaviours will take time to fully implement, and early implementation may be uneven. Our recommendations reinforce directions already set. Most of the recommendations can be set in motion now within existing mandates, using current resources.

Emphasize prevention

**Government, regional school boards,
community and social agencies**

1. Make safety and respect the norm in all organizational policies and practices. Promote these core values at every opportunity—both to prevent bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual aggression, and to promote social-emotional (relationship) competence in children, youth, and adults.

**Department of Education and Early
Childhood Development**

2. Revise the provincial, regional, and school codes of conduct to include opportunities for students to learn from their mistakes when they violate the school code—for example, through restorative practices.

Involve youth in decisions

**All departments of Government
that create legislation and policies
affecting youth**

3. Include a wide range of young people in advisory roles—for example, through the provincial Youth Advisory Committee and through the Leaders of Today (www.leadersoftoday.ca).

Regional school boards and schools

4. Ensure that many different students play meaningful roles in the development of policies, procedures, protocols, and initiatives that affect them—including the revision of regional and school codes of conduct.

Build strong relationships

Halifax Regional School Board

5. Revise the policy for Creating School Populations to take account of the needs of students who may have parents/guardians living in more than one school area. Clarify the approval process for transfers between schools to remove any inconsistencies between the policy and the practices.

**Halifax Regional School Board
and schools**

6. Develop a standard to guide school administrators in determining what informal information to share when a student transfers between high schools.

Regional school boards and schools

7. Ask students, staff, and parents about the quality of their relationships within the school community, using school surveys or other tools. Report the findings in the school boards' accountability reports to the community.

Regional school boards and schools

8. Engage parents who have many different perspectives and experiences to help in the essential work of creating welcoming schools and non-adversarial policies and practices for resolving problems.

Government departments, their regional bodies, and agencies

9. Remove systemic barriers among the various departments and agencies that serve students and their families, and make collaboration a core value. Model it; track it; celebrate it.

Expand SchoolsPlus

Government of Nova Scotia

10. Extend SchoolsPlus, or an alternative model for coordinating services for students and their families, to serve all school communities throughout Nova Scotia.

Departments of Education and Early Childhood Development, Health and Wellness, Community Services, and Justice

11. Use the Common Consent Form developed for SchoolsPlus as a model for sharing information in communities that currently do not have SchoolsPlus programs.

Focus on mental health

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

12. Emphasize social-emotional learning when reviewing and revising curriculum. Create a balance of learning outcomes that include intellectual, ethical, social-emotional, and physical development for all students.

Department of Health and Wellness

13. Commission an expert, independent review of the programs and services of the IWK Health Centre and the Capital Health Authority as they relate to the case of Rehtaeh Parsons.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We have appreciated the opportunity to conduct this review and meet so many thoughtful people from around the province. Their spirit of generosity and willingness to reflect honestly on the challenges facing youth, families, and the institutions that serve them, was remarkable.

We particularly appreciated the courage of Rehtaeh's parents and stepmother who met with us and shared their painful story in the hope that we can learn from it and prevent a similar tragedy with other youths and families.

Young people inspired us with their insights and their deep conviction that equality, inclusion, acceptance, and respect must be the foundation of our efforts to create a better world together. We trust that they will find themselves in our report and that this review will support the ongoing efforts of Nova Scotians to prevent bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual assault.

Our work was made possible by the support of a number of provincial public servants and by senior staff of the Halifax Regional School Board. They provided us with workspace, organized our meetings, provided documentation, and searched for answers to our many questions. In particular, our thanks go to Jeremy Smith of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. He sat through our meetings, made accurate and abundant records, and was there to answer our questions and to organize our schedule within the exceedingly tight timelines. We also recognize our editor, Joanne Wise, without whose commitment and skill we could not have presented this report.

Minister Marilyn More met with us weekly, raised searching questions, and encouraged us to think as deeply as possible within the terms of our mandate. She urged us to use our combined experience and expertise in thinking about the real nature of the problems and potential solutions.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Debra Pepler

Dr. Pepler is a professor of psychology at York University. She has a bachelor of arts and a bachelor of education, a master's of science from Dalhousie University, and a doctorate from the University of Waterloo. She is considered an innovative researcher, with one area of research being aggression and bullying.

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Ms. Milton is former CEO of the Canadian Education Association, which advances the cause of public education nationally.

Her primary area of interest is the engagement of young people in learning.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC FEEDBACK TO THE REVIEW OF HALIFAX REGIONAL SCHOOL BOARD'S SUPPORT OF REHTAEH PARSONS

**Prepared by the Nova Scotia Department of
Education and Early Childhood Development**

June 8, 2013

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 PROCESS

On April 18, 2013, the Premier's Office announced that Penny Milton and Debra Pepler had been contracted to conduct an independent review of the approach of policies and protocols of the Halifax Regional School Board, and associated agencies, as they relate to the tragic death of Rehtaeh Parsons. In order to encourage public input into the review process, the review panel launched an online response form on May 21, 2013. Government issued a press release to support the launch of the online response form. The online response form was available in both French and English at www.reviewpanelinput.com.

The review panel also accepted written submissions, which could be mailed to:

HRSB Review Panel
P.O. Box 333
Halifax, NS B3J 2N7

The goal of this consultation process was to gather a wide range of feedback from all possible stakeholders. The deadline for all submissions was June 7, 2013.

1.2 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The online response form received a total of 161 responses: 158 people responded to the English language version and 3 responded to the French language version. No written submissions were received by mail as of the closing date of June 7, 2013.

Respondents to the online response form were asked to complete three demographic questions, identifying the following:

- the role that best describes them as a respondent (student; parent; School Advisory Council member; teacher; principal/vice-principal; school board member; school board staff; or other)
- the grade level with which they are most involved (Grades primary-6; Grades 7-9; or Grades 10-12)
- the school board they work for or with which they are most closely associated

The majority of respondents identified themselves as either a parent (57.1 percent) or in the other category (26.1 percent). No respondents self-identified as a member of a School Advisory Council (SAC) or as either a principal or vice-principal. The following list shows the breakdown of the responses to the self-identification question.

Respondent Self-identification

57.1% Parent
8.1% Teacher
5.6% Student
1.9% School board staff
1.2% School board member
26.1% Other

Respondents that self-identified as other included retired teachers, grandparents, members of the public/concern citizens, youth care workers, and education professionals, such as guidance counsellors.

The majority of respondents indicated that they were most closely involved with grades 10-12 (41.6 percent); 23.6 percent of respondents most closely associated themselves with grades primary-6; 18.0 percent most closely associated with grades 7-9; and 16.8 percent identified with some other grade combination: 2.5 percent identified with grades primary-9; 8.1 percent identified with grades 7-12, and 6.2 percent identified with grades primary-12.

As the following list indicates, each school board was represented in the responses received. The majority of respondents (60.2 percent) were most closely associated with the Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB). This is not surprising as HRSB serves the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), which accounts for nearly half of the population of Nova Scotia. In addition, the review is closely associated with recent events involved students in HRSB, so it is expected that there would be a higher response rate from stakeholders living in the area served by that board.

Association with School Boards

60.2%	Halifax Regional School Board
6.2%	Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board
5.6%	Strait Regional School Board
5.0%	Annapolis Valley Regional School Board
3.7%	Chignecto-Central Regional School Board
3.7%	Tri-County Regional School Board
2.5%	Conseil scolaire acadien provincial
2.5%	South Shore Regional School Board
10.6%	Did not identify

2.0 KEY FINDINGS

The online response form allowed respondents to provide the review panel with their thoughts and feedback. In total 161 people provided input through the online response form. Respondents were asked the following guiding questions:

1. In what ways are current policies and services working well to support children and youth in areas related to their mental health, self-confidence, success in school, friendships, and relationships with others?
2. In your opinion, are there any gaps in supports and services for children and youth related to their social emotional development and mental health? If yes, where do these gaps exist and how would you go about addressing them?

2.1 GENERAL THEMES

Respondents provided thoughtful input for the review panel to consider. A number of respondents expressed strong emotions with respect to bullying among youth, particularly in relation to the events that led to the death of Rehtaeh Parsons. In many cases, respondents also shared personal stories about

their struggles with bullying and/or mental health, or about their frustration with the education system in addressing issues affecting their children.

Respondents recommended a number of ways to address bullying and to help students who are struggling with issues related to bullying, mental health, or other social issues. Recommendations to the review panel fell into three general categories:

1. Provide more supports to students and youth, including mental health services, guidance counsellors, public health nurses, SchoolsPlus, as well as education in areas of such as consent, equality, and mental health.
2. Involve parents in addressing bullying and ensure that they know how to effectively provide supports to their children.
3. Address issues of bullying and harassment quickly and ensure that policies are being followed with appropriate consequences.

2.1.1 Provide more supports to students and youth

A number of the recommendations made by respondents involved providing more, or better access to, supports and services for students both at the school site and through other service providers.

Better Access to Mental Health Care

Responses indicate that mental health services were by far the most important area where better supports should be made available to students and youth. Approximately 29 percent of respondents made a recommendation that focused around improving access to mental health supports in some way.

Respondents stated that wait time for accessing mental health services should be reduced, and that students should have access to services and supports at the school site. This involves ensuring that there staff are available to students and that they have the necessary background to assess students, provide counselling, and make any necessary referrals to specialists if needed. Some respondents felt that this could be addressed by increasing the number of guidance counsellors at all grade levels, with the overall goal of ensuring that all schools had a full time counsellor on staff. Other respondents recommended increasing the number of mental health professionals working in schools.

Many respondents felt that mental health supports should be available at all grade levels (primary-12) as opposed to just at the high school level (grades 10-12). Respondents further felt that students should be provided with more information about mental health in the curriculum.

Selections from Responses

"In Nova Scotia there is insufficient mental health care for children and teens.

Wait times are unacceptable. Some children and youth never do get the help that is needed"

– Other (developmental psychologists and grandmother)

"Curriculum for mental health starts in grade 9, and should start much earlier"

– School board staff

"Society cannot have it both ways. Parents need to parent. Teachers need to teach. Counsellors need to be the generalist mental health experts in the schools and mental health clinicians need to be the specialists."

– Other (guidance counsellor)

"It would be beneficial to teach about mental health in the school system after all they are taught sex ed and regular health but not mental health."

– Other (youth care worker)

"There needs to be more education taught to the students about mental health to help decrease the stigma associated with looking for the necessary help."

– Other (concerned member of the public)

Better Access to Other Supports

In addition to mental health care, approximately 23 percent of respondents identified various supports and services that they felt would help address issues related to bullying, harassment, mental health, and social-emotional issues. The majority of recommendations around supports to students had to do with increasing access to existing resources. In most cases, respondents identified a resource or service that they felt should be made available to all students in the province. Often respondents would comment that existing supports, such as guidance counsellors, public health nurses, or SchoolsPlus, are not available at all schools.

While respondents identified a wide variety of resources and supports that they felt would benefit students, the most common recommendation was to increase the number of guidance counsellors in schools. Many respondents felt that guidance counsellors should be available in every school across the province, from grades primary-12.

Other supports and services and supports that respondents recommended promoting or increasing included:

- Restorative Justice practices
- Positive Behaviour Supports (PEBs)
- School social workers
- School nurses
- SchoolsPlus
- LGBTI supports like Gay-Straight Alliances in schools

Selections from Responses

“School guidance counsellors are the front line at school in dealing with students’ mental health issues. We need to ensure every school has full-time guidance to deal with the myriad of issues students face in becoming successful learners.”

– Parent

“Why not bring the parents and child into a proper mediation situation in an attempt to resolve the situation. Have the children hear how their behaviors impact others – restorative practice – would go a long way.”

– Parent

“Programs such as PEBS and celebrations of positive behaviours (i.e. Gotchas, PPP ballots, etc.) also make a difference in students’ lives by providing recognition for desired behaviours. ...Students with family issues, friendship struggles, identity problems, gender questions, low self-esteem etc. need to know someone is available to hear their concerns and help them see the big picture while guiding them to acceptable decision making.”

– Teacher

“I do not believe that there are any support systems. Guidance counsellors are often overworked doing the work of too many and cannot make themselves available when needed.”

– Parent

“Another gap is within the counsellors office themselves. My school only has one counsellor, and it’s very difficult to be able to see her when you need to.”

– Student

“School social workers are integral to facilitating communication with the IWK, and this is a huge part of their job, however they only provide service to limited schools, and their circuits are unreasonably large (10-12 schools) so that they are often unavailable due to their schedule.”

– School board staff

“School nurses need to be in more than just some high schools. I think they can be instrumental just with their presence. They provide remarkable support in high schools, but resources are stretched too thin.”

– Parent

Changes to Curriculum

Approximately 17 percent of respondents recommended providing students with more education around life skills and issues related to human relationships. Topics recommended by participants included:

- Understanding consent
- Understanding sexual harassments, assault, and abuse
- Understanding and identifying mental health issues
- Understanding drug addiction
- Promoting sexual education

- Promoting empathy and equality
- Promoting cultural understanding

Respondents felt that if more time were devoted in the curriculum to help students understand how to work toward and build positive, respectful relationships, it would help address issues related to building and respectful behaviour before they began.

Selections from Responses

“Children must be taught compassion, humility, and equality. Gender, race, sexuality, ability- these are subjects children need to be taught. Civil rights, feminism, and movements for the equality across all difference are the most important history and current affairs lessons we can give our children. Sexual health, sexual education are also important.”

– Parent

“There needs to be a course on Life Skills that encompasses all things like bullying, drug use and abuse, more in depth info on sex education, mental illness, first aid, how to do taxes, financial planning/budgeting, signs of a friend in trouble, how to deal with peer pressure, etc..”

– Other (concerned citizen)

“Things we need to do: More support for LGBTQ children, young adults. [...] Education in youth, teaching importance of consent and what it is. Empowering both women and men to say no if they truly do not want to be involved sexually. Educating those would-be rapists to understand that consent, while drunk, is not consent.”

– Student

“There is no REQUIRED learning for issues relating to sexual violence, consent, etc. in our high schools, the time they need it most.”

– Other

2.1.2 Involve parents in addressing bullying

Approximately 19 percent of respondents felt that parents, families, and/or the community need to play a larger role in addressing issues related to student behaviour and bullying. Many respondents felt that parents could help model appropriate behaviour, address inappropriate behaviour, and identify concerns related to the social, emotional, and/or mental health of their children.

A number of respondents recommended providing parents with resources and/or training to help them play a more active role in their children’s lives, and to help them address issues when and if they come up. Some respondents also felt that schools should also play a more active role in engaging parents.

Selections from Responses

"This issue is societal and community driven, and requires the intense response of us all. Schools cannot begin to act alone in the response to this. Our community leaders and social iconic figures must begin to set example in their everyday lives, and this must be pointed out to children. Acceptance must be modelled in adult staffs, in communities, and in the way we do business."

– Other (SchoolsPlus facilitator)

"Parents need to be provided with access to information on supportive parenting, appropriate limits and boundary setting, and active communication skills."

– Student

"Parents become almost invisible once their children enter junior high. This is not what many parents wish, it is how we are treated by educators."

– Parent

2.1.3 Address issues of bullying and harassment

Respondents felt strongly that school staff should be actively involved in addressing issues related to bullying in an efficient and timely manner. Many respondents felt that students who bully should be punished quickly and severely. Respondents also recommended taking steps to ensure that teachers and principals understood their roles and responsibilities with respect to student behaviour, and that they were accountable for implementing current policies and protocols.

Punish students who bully

Approximately 13 percent of respondents felt that students who engaging in inappropriate and/or criminal behaviour should be punished or reprimanded in some way. Some felt that bullying behaviours should be treated as a criminal offense, others that students who engage in those behaviours should be expelled. Some participants argued for a more balanced approach to create a school climate where issues of bullying are immediately addressed, recognizing that punishments may not be necessary in all

Selections from Responses

"I think if we approach bullying/harassment from a Zero tolerance perspective, with the foundation being compassion and acceptance we would move further along. Zero tolerance does not mean automatic punishment...but it would mean that the act of bullying/harassment is immediately recognized and not acceptable."

– School board member

"Students who are bothered by others are scared to speak up because of a lack of consequences for the aggressor. The complainant is further tormented by fear of reprisals or of not being believed. They don't feel safe speaking out and if they retaliate, they are punished. Students who witness inappropriate behavior are scared to come forward; they may become the next victim. School staff need to have the approval to ACT not just TALK."

– Parent

situations. In general, participants agreed that consequences for inappropriate behaviour need to be in place and incidents need to be addressed quickly.

Conduct timely investigations into reported incidents

Approximately 12 percent of respondents felt that school staff could or should do more to address bullying in a timely manner. Many respondents expressed some level of frustration with how incidents are currently being handled by teachers and/or principals. Respondents felt that in some cases, school staff attempt to pass the issue off. Respondents were also concerned that not all incidents are taken seriously, and that the student reporting the incident may often be required to show proof of the inappropriate behaviour that took place. In these cases, respondents felt that putting the burden of proof on the victim is unfair.

Respondents recommended that incidents of bullying be taken seriously and that they be investigated and addressed immediately. Many of these respondents also recommended stronger punishments for students who are involved in inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying.

Selections from Responses

“...I think we have to go further than just wear a pink shirt on anti-bullying day. If a student goes seeking help from a teacher or guidance counsellor, those concerns should be addressed immediately!”

– Parent

“What I have found is that authority figures such as teachers, principals and police do not listen to children. Sometimes they do not take them seriously or drop the ball on their concerns. A good way to address a child’s concerns and issues with bullying or other issues is with restorative justice techniques.”

– Parent

“THE SCHOOLS, TEACHERS, HEAD OF SCHOOLS MUST BECOME INVOLVED EARLY IN THE GAME AND NOT PASS THE BUCK!”

– Parent

“.... If obscene pictures are being forwarded around to a school population, then it is the school’s business.”

– Teacher

Ensure that professionals understand and adhere to existing policies and procedures

A small number of participants (approximately 7 percent) felt that a number of good policies and procedures are in place in both the education and justices systems to deal with bullying and other inappropriate behaviours. These respondents felt that in many cases the policies were not being enacted effectively. They felt that more stringent accountability mechanisms and better training around the intent of the policies would help ensure that they are applied more effectively.

Selections from Responses

“Current policies in our area provide a good means for youth, parents and staff to address concerns [...] As staffing changes, and with high demands on time, it may not always be possible to educate around nor fully and consistently implement these policies. In any profession, where staff is stretched, it becomes more difficult to address growing numbers of responsibilities.”

– Other (SchoolsPlus facilitator)

“I think that that some current policies and services are probably good and will still be used when the recommendations of this panel are implemented. However, at present, I believe that these policies and services are ineffective because of the silos, inconsistent adoption and application of current policies, and too few resources available to focus on the mission critical issues relating to social/emotional development of our youth.”

– Parent

2.2 COMMON CONCERNS AND FRUSTRATION

In addition to recommendations aimed at helping students who struggle with issues related to bullying, mental health, or other social issues, a number of respondents used the online response form as a way to voice their frustrations with the current processes in place in the education system, while a small minority voiced support for the work schools are doing to address bullying.

A very small group of respondents raised concerns related to the use of the term “bullying,” the prevalence of violent and sexualize images in the media. Some of these respondents also raised concerns with respect to how the media reports of issues related to bullying and suicide.

2.2.1 Support for current processes

Only about 5 percent of respondents felt that schools were generally doing a good job addressing issues of bullying and providing necessary supports to students that were struggling with social, emotional, or mental health issues.

Selections from Responses

“In the past two years at my school, I’ve noticed that the guidance counsellors and some of the teachers have been more sensitive towards the mental health of students. They do teach relevant things in classes on how to deal with mental health and relationships with others.”

– Student

“I think they are taking bullying more seriously than they ever did in schools there is always someone you can talk to if you are upset or just need someone to talk to.”

– Student

2.2.2 Frustration with Current Processes

Approximately 31 percent of respondents did not feel that the education system was providing appropriate or necessary supports to students dealing with these issues. Many of those respondents felt that the current policies and protocols are insufficient or are not being properly applied at the school site.

A number of respondents provided personal accounts of how they felt the education system failed to meet their needs or the needs of their children. In some cases, respondents offered suggestions or recommendations as to how the system could be improved; in others they simply stated that the system does not adequately address the needs of students or families.

Selections from Responses

"I find the schools say they're against bullying yet I never see them actually DO anything to try to stop it. Kids are still being bullied and insulted if they're homosexual for instance. I find the schools expect the kids to stand up for other kids and try to keep their hands out of it."

– Parent

"I witness first hand on a daily basis, bullying taking place at my school every day, not only students bullying students, but teachers, yes teachers, bullying students. Not physically of course, but verbally, and words hurt more than any fist ever could"

– Student.

"I am a parent of a bullied child – I had to almost quit work in order to deal with it, it was almost to the situation where both the school admin & board (safe schools) did minimal amount of resolving the issues at hand hoping that if they prolonged it I would give up. I did not!! My perseverance paid off for my child – but, not every parent has the extra stamina that I have to push until there is a solution."

– Parent

A number of respondents entered a response with either the exact same or very similar wording.

In total 28 percent of respondents did not feel the education system was providing the necessary supports to students.

2.2.3 Concerns with the Term Bullying and the Media

A small number of respondents (approximately 2 percent) raised concerns with respect to how the media reports on bullying. Some respondents (approximately 2 percent) also felt that the term "bullying" is being misused and applied to too broad a range of behaviours.

Selections from Responses

“Depressed teens need a reason to live, not a reason to die. Stop valourizing teen suicide as some noble response....”

– Parent

“Youth are being exposed to a highly sexualized world; it’s on TV, in movies, teen magazines, music, the internet ... it’s everywhere. Imagine your grandmother being exposed to what today’s youth are having to live in and grow up with.”

– Other (criminology graduate)

“Systemic abuse and modelling of harm is pervasive in media, in sport, in our political arena, and in the world around our youth. It appears to go unchecked, and appears to become more subtle, intense, and pervasive. Pornified and violent images have found their way into normative messaging and advertising; in toys and gaming for younger and younger children; in clothing and fashion styles. Rude, sarcastic, and abusive treatment of others is a normative model of interaction from political party ads to sit-coms.”

– Other (SchoolsPlus facilitator)

“This behavior has to stop being called bullying. It is not bullying; it is harassment.”

– Teacher

